

criteria are spelled out, revise your assignment so it will elicit the work described in the criteria.

WHAT IS A RUBRIC?

A rubric is a scoring guide: a simple list, chart, or guide that describes the criteria that you and perhaps your colleagues will use to score or grade an assignment. At a minimum, a rubric lists the *things you're looking for* when you evaluate a student assignment. The list is often accompanied by *guidelines for evaluating each of those things*.

Some faculty are put off by the “jargony” nature of the word “rubric.” If you find this to be the case, simply substitute in your discussions a term such as “scoring guide” or “grading criteria.”

WHY USE RUBRICS?

If you have never used a rubric to grade student assignments, you will find that using them makes your life easier and improves your students' learning in several ways.

Rubrics help students understand your expectations. If you distribute your rubric with the initial assignment, students will understand exactly what you want them to do and where they should focus their energies. You'll have fewer questions from students about what they are to do, and your students may find the assignment a richer, more rewarding experience.

Rubrics can inspire better student performance. Rubrics show students exactly what you value and what you'll be looking for when you evaluate their assignments. Knowing what you expect will motivate some (not all!) to aim for the target you've identified.

Rubrics make scoring easier and faster. While it may seem that using a scoring guide adds an extra burden to the grading process, faculty overwhelmingly report that rubrics actually make the grading process faster because rubrics give them a clear reminder of what they're looking for and they don't need to write as many comments on papers.

Rubrics make scoring more accurate, unbiased, and consistent. Rubrics ensure that every paper is evaluated using the same criteria. The consistency of rubrics can help track changes in student performance as you refine your teaching. Rubrics can help you determine, for example, whether introducing collaborative learning activities into your classes has helped improve students' analysis skills.

Rubrics improve communication with your students and help them understand their strengths and weaknesses. Marked rubrics give students a clear picture of exactly what they did well and what deficiencies they should address in future assignments. Rubrics give students a more complete picture of their performance than a few comments scrawled on their papers. They also give you feedback: If a number of students are not demonstrating understanding of a particular concept or skill, rubrics bring this to your attention.

Rubrics reduce arguments with your students. By making your scoring criteria explicit, rubrics stop student arguments (“Why did he get a B- when I got a C+?”) cold. You can focus your conversations with students on how they can improve their performance rather than defending your grading practices.

WHAT DO RUBRICS LOOK LIKE?

Rubrics can be classified into four formats: checklists, rating scales, descriptive rubrics, and holistic rating scales, each of which has advantages and disadvantages.

Checklists

A checklist rubric is a simple list indicating the presence of the “things you're looking for.” Figure 7.1 is an example of a checklist rubric.

Figure 7.1

A Checklist Rubric for a Web Site

- The purpose of the site is obvious.
- The site's structure is clear and intuitive.
- Titles are meaningful.
- Each page loads quickly.
- The text is easy to read.
- Graphics and multimedia help convey the site's main points.
- The design is clean, uncluttered, and engaging.
- Spelling, punctuation, and grammar are correct.
- Contact information for the author or webmaster is given.
- The date each page was last updated is given.

Figure 7.4

A Descriptive Rubric for a Slide Presentation on Findings From Research Sources

	Well Done (5)	Satisfactory (4-3)	Needs Improvement (2-1)	Incomplete (0)
Organization	Clearly, concisely written. Logical, intuitive progression of ideas and supporting information. Clear and direct cues to all information.	Logical progression of ideas and supporting information. Most cues to information are clear and direct.	Vague in conveying viewpoint and purpose. Some logical progression of ideas and supporting information, but cues are confusing or flawed.	Lacks a clear point of view and logical sequence of information. Cues to information are not evident.
Persuasiveness	Motivating questions and advance organizers convey main idea. Information is accurate.	Includes persuasive information.	Includes persuasive information with few facts.	Information is incomplete, out of date, and/or incorrect.
Introduction	Presents overall topic. Draws in audience with compelling questions or by relating to audience's interests or goals.	Clear, coherent, and related to topic.	Some structure but does not create a sense of what follows. May be overly detailed or incomplete. Somewhat appealing.	Does not orient audience to what will follow.

	Well Done (5)	Satisfactory (4-3)	Needs Improvement (2-1)	Incomplete (0)
Clarity	Readable, well-sized fonts. Italics, boldface, and indentations enhance readability. Text is appropriate length. Background and colors enhance readability.	Sometimes fonts are readable, but in a few places fonts, italics, boldface, long paragraphs, color, or background detract.	Overall readability is difficult with lengthy paragraphs, too many fonts, dark or busy background, overuse of boldface, or lack of appropriate indentations.	Text is very difficult to read. Long blocks of text, small fonts, inappropriate colors, or poor use of headings, indentations, or boldface.
Layout	Aesthetically pleasing. Contributes to message with appropriate use of headings and white space.	Uses white space appropriately.	Shows some structure but is cluttered, busy, or distracting.	Cluttered and confusing. Spacing and headings do not enhance readability.

Adapted with permission from a rubric developed by Patricia Ryan, lecturer in the Department of Reading, Special Education, and Instructional Technology at Towson University.

on. Figure 7.5 is an example of a holistic scoring guide; Figure 8.4 in Chapter 8 includes another example.

The major shortcomings of holistic scoring guides are the difficulty achieving consistent scores across raters (discussed later in this chapter) and feedback that is not quite as explicit as in descriptive rubrics.

Figure 7.5

A Holistic Scoring Guide for Students in a Ballet Program

A: Active learner – Enthusiastic – Very energetic – Fully engaged in every class – Able to accept corrections – Able to make and synthesize corrections – Able to maintain corrections – Able to self-assess – Shows continuous improvement in major problem areas – Connects movement sequences well – Demonstrates strong dynamic phrasing – Very musical – Continuously demonstrates correct épaulement – Demonstrates advanced understanding and applies correct alignment, fully extended classical line, full use of rotation, and use of classical terminology – Daily demonstrates commitment to the art form and addresses areas of weaknesses without instructor input

B: Active learner – Enthusiastic – Energetic – Engaged in every class – Able to accept most corrections – Able to make and synthesize most corrections – Able to maintain most corrections – Able to self-assess – Shows improvement in major problem areas – Connects movement sequences relatively well – Demonstrates adequate dynamic phrasing – Generally musical – Generally demonstrates correct épaulement – Demonstrates understanding and generally applies correct alignment, classical line, and use of classical terminology – Continues to address areas of weakness and shows general improvement

C: Active learner but not fully physically/mentally engaged in class – Able to accept most corrections – Not quite able to make and synthesize corrections – Not yet able to maintain corrections – Unable to fully self-assess – Shows some improvement in major problem areas – Connects some movement sequences – Demonstrates limited dynamic phrasing – Almost musical – Working toward correct épaulement – Working on understanding and applying correct alignment, continuing to find classical line, unable to fully execute artistry and use classical terminology – Continues to address areas of weakness but unable to demonstrate consistent visible improvement

D: Not an active learner/lacks sufficient energy – Not physically or mentally engaged in class – Unable to accept/understand most corrections – Unable to make and synthesize corrections – Unable to maintain corrections – Unable to self-assess – Shows very little improvement in major problem areas – Seldom connects movement sequences well – Demonstrates marginal dynamic phrasing – Seldom musical – Unable to demonstrate correct épaulement – Unable to apply correct alignment, demonstrate classical line, execute artistry or use classical terminology – Seldom addresses areas of weakness – Unable to demonstrate visible improvement in most areas of weakness – Lacks self-motivation

Adapted with permission from a holistic scoring guide used by the faculty of the Department of Dance at Towson University.

WHAT ARE THE STEPS TO CREATING EFFECTIVE RUBRICS?

Rubrics are not difficult to create, although descriptive rubrics can be time-consuming; just follow these steps.

Look for Models

Rubrics are increasingly widespread assessment tools, so it makes sense to begin creating a rubric by looking for models that you can adapt to your circumstances. (If you use or adapt someone else's rubric, ask for permission and acknowledge the work of the original author.)

Start with a simple web search; many institutions, programs, and faculty post their rubrics there. If you subscribe to a discussion list on teaching in your discipline, post a query asking for examples of rubrics. Rubrics are far more common in basic (K–12) education than in higher education, so if you search for rubrics for, say, science laboratory reports, you may find more examples from high school than college. Don't despair; high school rubrics can still give you good ideas.

A number of web sites offer free templates and other simple software for creating and storing rubrics; use keywords like "rubric generator," "rubric builder," or "create rubrics" to find them.

List the “Things You Are Looking For”

Creating a rubric starts by listing the “things you’re looking for”—the things you want students to demonstrate in the final product. Ask:

- Why are we giving students this assignment? What are its key learning goals? What do we want students to learn by completing it?
- What defines the skills we want students to demonstrate? What are the characteristics of good writing, a good presentation, a good lab report, good student teaching, and so forth?
- What specific characteristics of the finished project do we want to see?

Consider also the key characteristics of student assignments identified by Relearning by Design (2000):

- **Impact:** Does the assignment accomplish its purpose? Is the problem solved? Is the argument persuasive?
- **Quality:** Is the assignment of high quality? Are its components sound, clear, and well organized?
- **Methods:** Does the student follow correct procedures and use appropriate tools? Does the assignment show expected behaviors, such as evidence of careful research or collaboration?
- **Content validity:** Is the assignment accurate? Are arguments defensible?
- **Mastery:** Does the assignment demonstrate complex, mature understanding of the subject? Is the work insightful? fluent?

You may initially have a long list of things you’re looking for! If so, the list probably needs to be pruned. A long rubric makes assignments more time-consuming to score and makes it harder for your students to understand the key skills that they are to focus on as they complete the assignment. Effective rubrics can have as few as three characteristics and often have no more than eight. Lengthy rubrics are more appropriate when the assignment is a holistic, culminating experience such as a senior thesis or field experience in which students are expected to demonstrate a broad range of learning goals.

So review your list and reduce it to only the most significant tasks, skills, or abilities that you’d like your students to demonstrate. Discard anything that isn’t a high-priority goal or that isn’t observable in this

particular assignment. (Enthusiasm for science might not be observable in a lab report, for example.) Perhaps you can combine a group of similar skills into one category.

Now edit your list so that each characteristic is written using explicit, concrete terms, preferably action verbs or clear adjectives. “Writing quality” tells students and colleagues little about what you’re looking for; “organization and structure” tells them far more. Be on the lookout for terms like “adequate organization,” “appropriate vocabulary,” or “acceptable grammar” that don’t tell your students or colleagues what kind of organization, vocabulary, or grammar you consider acceptable.

Leave Room for the “Ineffables” and the Unexpected

Some faculty have found that students who are given rubrics along with an assignment do exactly what the rubric tells them that they need to do but no more, yielding solid but somewhat flat and uninspired products. To encourage originality, creativity, effort, and that unexpected but delightful “something extra,” simply build these qualities into your rubric. You might tell students, for example, that ten percent of their assignment score will be based on things like effort, originality, or insight.

Create the Rating Scale

If you are creating any rubric other than a checklist, once you have listed the “things you’re looking for,” your next step is defining the performance levels that make up the rating scale. While there is no hard and fast rule for an optimal number of performance levels, there should be at least three, for exemplary, adequate, and inadequate performance. (The exemplary category is needed to motivate students to do better than merely adequate work.) Usually no more than five levels are needed; if faced with too many levels, faculty may have a hard time distinguishing consistently between, say, six and seven on a ten-point scale.

There’s also no hard and fast rule on how to label each performance level. Use descriptors that are clear and relevant to you, your colleagues, and your students. Labels that work well for one assignment or discipline may not work for another. Examples of possible performance levels are:

- Exceeds standard, meets standard, approaching standard, below standard
- Complete evidence, partial evidence, minimal evidence, no evidence
- Excellent, very good, adequate, needs attention
- Letter grades (A, B, C, D, F)

Whatever labels you choose, make sure that you, your colleagues, and your students all have a clear, common understanding of which category represents minimally acceptable performance. If you use letter grades, for example, does C or D represent minimally acceptable performance?

If you are creating a descriptive rubric, once the performance levels are defined, your next step is to create brief descriptors for each trait at each performance level. If you are creating a holistic scoring guide, once the performance levels are defined, your next step is to create a written description for each performance level. What exactly do you want to see, for example, in an exemplary assignment? in an adequate assignment? What kind of work merits a failing grade?

Test the Rubric

Your final step is to try out the rubric by using it to score some actual samples of student work. Score some of your students' best and worst work. Are your standards appropriate, unrealistically high, or insufficiently challenging? Revise your rubric if necessary to improve its clarity and value.

HOW CAN RUBRICS BE USED AS TEACHING TOOLS?

Consider having students help you develop a rubric by discussing the characteristics of an effective assignment, drafting a rubric, and/or commenting on your draft rubric. Involving students in rubric design can get them thinking more actively about what they should learn from an assignment, where they should focus their efforts as they work on the assignment, and the performance level to which they should strive.

As noted earlier in this chapter, students often perform better if they know what they're aiming for, so give students copies of your rubric when you first distribute the assignment.

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RECOMMENDED READING

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